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ABSTRACT

A marital intervention method similar to conjoint counseling and requiring professional involvement with only one spouse in a marital dyad was investigated. Prior to the treatment, one spouse from each of 44 couples was trained in open, genuine self-disclosure and empathic understanding skills. After this training, 19 spouses trained their partners in the same skills over a five-week treatment period. The remaining 25 spouses held weekly discussions with their partners on five important marital issues. A third group of eight couples served as a no-treatment control. Results indicated that: (1) spouses were able to train their partners in the communication skills; (2) due to the short treatment period, no change was found in the couples' marital satisfaction; (3) it is possible to train spouses as relationship change agents; and (4) intervention methods other than individual counseling are potentially helpful to couples in which one spouse is not willing to participate in marriage counseling. (Author)

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Abstract*

Unilateral Marital Intervention: Training Spouses to Train Their Partners in Communication Skills
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Two intervention strategies dominate in the field of marriage counseling. The first is individual counseling in which personal dysfunction is considered to be the cause of marital stress; therefore the counselor sees one spouse alone, without the presence of a partner. Individual counseling is a unilateral intervention in which the focus is on the individual and not on his or her marital relationship.

The second strategy is conjoint counseling. This intervention is carried out with both husband and wife present in counseling sessions together. The focus of the counseling is on their relationship. Conjoint counseling has been shown to be the more effective of the two strategies.

Even though conjoint counseling is more effective, it is of no value to couples in which one spouse is unable or unwilling to become involved in counseling. Evidence indicates this may involve up to one third of those seeking marital help. In addition, because the conjoint service delivery strategy is used by all the currently popular marital enrichment programs, services designed to improve already satisfying relationships are not available to couples in which one spouse is not able or willing to participate in improving his or her relationship. Thus, an alternative service delivery strategy that combines the flexibility of individual counseling with the effectiveness of conjoint

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counseling is needed by consumers and practitioners of marriage counseling and marital enrichment.

To respond to this need, a unilateral marital intervention was tested that: 1) was similar to conjoint counseling in that both spouses were involved in the intervention, and 2) required professional involvement with only one spouse in a marital dyad. This was accomplished by training one spouse as an intervention agent in his or her relationship. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to assess whether one spouse could train another in interpersonal communication skills and to assess the effects of such training on their marital communication, marital relationship and marital satisfaction.

The theoretical rationale for training spouses as relationship intervention agents was based on the unilateral intervention model derived from the Bowen family systems theory. The components of that model include training one spouse in some aspect of intimate relationship functioning and providing supervision while that spouse attempts to change his or her relationship system.

As understood from the viewpoint of the Bowen theory, individuals affect and are affected by their relationship system. Efforts to change individual dysfunction without addressing the relationship system which perpetuates that dysfunction, as is true of individual counseling, do not reflect an understanding of individual or relationship functioning. The supervision provided in the intervention derived from the Bowen theory is designed to aid the relationship intervention agent in preventing the relationship system from reestablishing old patterns of interaction which is the tendency of open systems such as marital relationships.

In this study, one spouse from each marital dyad was first trained in interpersonal communication skills. The Danish and Hauer (1973) Helping Skills Program was used to train them in two skills, open and genuine self-disclosure (speaking) and empathic understanding (listening). Both skills have been established as effective in increasing marital communication and marital satisfaction when taught to married couples. When this training was completed, the trained spouses then provided the same training to their partners. The research evaluating the Danish and Hauer Program has shown that not only is the program an effective method of training these skills but also, that paraprofessionals can provide the training to peers. This research was used as the empirical rationale for one spouse being able to train another.

Fifty-two couples were involved in the study. Prior to the treatment phase, one spouse (participant) from each of 44 dyads was trained in speaking and listening skills over a five week period. This training, which was shown to be successful, was carried out in two groups. When the training was completed, both the participants and their marital partners in each group were pretested and their speaking skill, listening skill, marital communication, relationship and marital satisfaction assessed. The treatment phase of the study was then implemented over a period of five weeks. One group of participants trained their partners in speaking and listening skills (trainer group, 19 participants, N=38). The other group of participants was given the alternate treatment which consisted of five discussion assignments completed at home with their marital partners (discussion group, 25 participants, N=50). This group controlled for the amount of time trainer group participants and their partners spent together as a result of the treatment, the high

skill of the participants, time spent with the investigator and expectation of marital improvement. A third group of eight couples served as a no-treatment control (N=16). These couples were recruited for a marital enrichment program that began after the present study was completed.

With respect to the speaking and listening skills, it was hypothesized that the trainer group partners would have higher skills than the discussion group partners and the no-treatment control spouses. Further, it was hypothesized that the discussion group partners would have higher skills than the no-treatment control spouses. The skills were assessed by the Self-Feeling Awareness Scale (SFAS) and the Acceptance of Other Scale (AOS). On the SFAS, the speaking skill measure, the trainer group partners scored higher than the spouses in the no-treatment control group ($p < .05$). No other differences were found.

On the AOS, which measured listening skill, the trainer group partners scored higher than the discussion group partners and the no-treatment control spouses, and the discussion group partners scored higher than the no-treatment control spouses ($p < .05$).

In regard to the self-report measures, it was hypothesized that the trainer, discussion and no-treatment control groups would differ from each other. The subjects' marital communication, marital relationship and marital satisfaction were assessed by the Marital Communication Inventory, Interpersonal Relationship Scale and the Marital Adjustment Scale, respectively. No differences between the three groups on any measure were found ($p > .05$).

The results pertaining to the primary purpose of the study which was to determine whether one spouse could train another in interpersonal communication skills, showed that the participants were mostly effective at training their partners in the skills. They were not as effective on the speaking skill as on the listening skill. It was concluded that the speaking skill training should have been longer and that with this modification, the participants might have been as effective on the speaking skill as they were on the listening skill. The discussion treatment was also concluded to be an effective method of increasing the listening skill.

The assessment of the effects of the treatment showed that asking one spouse to train another and asking spouses to hold discussions on important marital issues were not destructive to marital relations. The lack of positive effects of the treatments, in part, were attributed to the short treatment period and to the high marital satisfaction of the participating couples.

The implications of the results were that the model of unilateral intervention derived from the Bowen theory was supported because the participants in this study were successfully trained to implement a relationship oriented intervention.